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ABSTRACT

The article outlines six strategies for teaching handwriting to learning disabled elementary students with differing instructional needs. A rationale for the use of each strategy is followed by a step-by-step description of the teaching procedure. Strategy goals include the following: (1) teaching the manuscript alphabet through letter pictures to a student with a revisualization deficit; (2) using color stimulation to teach cursive handwriting to a student showing signs of a high degree of activity or agitation; (3) teaching handwriting to a student with poor motor memory using the large arm muscles; (4) using multisensory instruction to teach handwriting to students with an attention deficit; (5) teaching cursive handwriting as a way of helping to correct a reversal problem; (6) using relaxation to help learning disabled students improve handwriting and decrease physical tension. (JW)

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Strategies for Teaching Handwriting to the Learning Disabled

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Abstract

This article will present six goals for teaching handwriting to students with specific learning disabilities. Following each goal will be a step-by-step procedure describing the strategies for accomplishing that specific goal. A rationale has been provided for each goal in order to further validate each activity.

Strategies for Teaching Handwriting to the Learning Disabled

Many students with learning problems have difficulty with handwriting (Mercer & Mercer, 1985), and certain learning disabilities occur only in connection with handwriting (Hanson, 1976). Based on this it would seem that the teaching of handwriting to the learning disabled student should be a very specialized and individualized type of instruction. Handwriting is the basic tool needed for written expression, a very important skill for all students. It has been found, however, that the teacher of the student with severe handwriting problems who decides to provide additional formal handwriting lessons may be limited in resources because remedial handwriting instruction is sorely lacking in many school systems (Hofmeister, 1973). This paper will focus on this problem and provide some very specific procedures for handwriting remediation.

The benefits that come from improved handwriting could have implications in many areas in a student's life (Kaminsky & Powers, 1981) and thus also help to improve the student's self-image. It may also help to reinforce other areas of language development, including reading, spelling, and written communication (Kaminsky & Powers, 1981). All of these factors speak for themselves in reinforcing the importance of teaching handwriting to learning disabled students.

In this paper a description of six methods of teaching handwriting to learning disabled students will be presented. For each goal, a rationale will be provided that will include a clear definition of the learning deficit and a justification for the technique of remediation. The procedure for teaching each of the handwriting skills will be presented in the form of a task analysis.

Goal # 1 - Teaching the manuscript alphabet through letter pictures to a student with a revisualization deficit.

Rationale:

Certain learning disabilities occur only in connection with handwriting. One of these is a deficit in revisualization where the student cannot revisualize letters or words and cannot write spontaneously nor from dictation (Hanson, 1976). A strategy that has been found to be effective in teaching handwriting to students with this deficit is by associating a letter with something of interest to the student (Hanson, 1976). This method would be used in conjunction with verbal cues, (e.g.) the instructor will describe each stroke of the particular letter and the student will be encouraged to say the sound of the letter aloud as they write it. This method has also been found to meet the learning disabled student's needs in learning handwriting (Hagin, 1983).

Procedure:

1. Review the alphabet orally saying it simultaneously and repeat after me.
2. Start with lower case letters.
3. a - Ask student what picture comes to mind when he or she sees this letter.
4. Encourage student to come up with own idea.
5. Give suggestions only if asked.
6. Possible suggestions would be: a- doornob, b- leg with big toe, c- quarter moon, d- chair etc.
7. Student will make a booklet with one letter picture on each page.

8. The letter will be the central theme of picture and the student can elaborate around the "letter picture" to make a scene. This will help to instill the memory of the letter picture in his or her mind.
9. Student will proceed to capital letters and do the same thing.
10. Suggestions - A- tepee, B- 2 toes sideways, C- large quarter moon, D- sail etc.
11. Booklet will be finished with a decorated cover.
12. Student will read booklet aloud indicating each letter and picture that was associated with the letter.
13. Booklet will be put on display for others to see.

Goal # 2 - Using color stimulation to teach cursive handwriting to a student showing signs of a high degree of activity or agitation.

Rationale:

Most learning disabled students use a different strategy - impulsiveness; often the degree of impulsiveness is extreme (Lyman, 1986). A specific behavior associated with some learning disabled students is a high degree of activity or agitation (Adelman & Taylor, 1986). The optimal stimulation theory (Zentall, 1986), suggests that these students have a greater need for stimulation or are less tolerant of situations and tasks involving minimal stimulation. In a recent study (Zentall, 1986), it has been found that over-active students can perform the task of handwriting as well as regular students, and show reduced activity when color stimulation is added throughout a minimally stimulating task; handwriting being one of these tasks.

Procedure:

1. The setting or atmosphere of workroom should be quiet and there should be no external stimuli outside of that controlled by instructor.
2. Each lesson will be short and seatwork will be closely supervised. Correct and neat work will be rewarded and immediate feedback will be given.
3. The student will be allowed to use crayons, felt pen or magic marker.
4. Teacher will demonstrate, starting with the lower case letters, on the blackboard with the same color as the student is using.
5. The lines on the student's paper will be the same color as the lines on the board. This will avoid confusion when referring to the base line etc.
6. As the lesson continues, one letter for each lesson, more color will be added to sustain the student's attention. Colored arrows will be used for directional cues, green and red signals, for "Go" and "Stop" signs.
7. If needed, use different colors for different strokes and number them so that the student can see the order of the strokes for each letter.
8. The student will be able to self-check his or her work by using a colored layover and also practice by tracing over a model that is done in different colors.

Goal # 3 - Teaching handwriting to a student with poor motor memory using the large arm muscles.

Rationale:

A severe handwriting difficulty is often associated with concomitant learning disorders; a contributing factor being a faulty motor memory

relating to the storage of motor information in the brain (Kaminsky & Powers, 1981). Added to this, it has been found that learning disabilities have been identified with such areas as poor memory and motor skills (Shore, 1986).

It has been found that for students with handwriting difficulties, the opportunities to reorganize learning behavior is provided when the student learns to make letters using the large muscles of the arm (Kaminsky & Powers, 1981). In dealing with students who have faulty motor memory, it has also been noted that motor memory is enhanced by activating the large muscles system (Kaminsky & Powers, 1981). Based on these factors, it would be useful to teach handwriting using only the large muscles initially with this type of student; and only when learned move to the smaller hand muscles. (Lyman, 1986) offers that using both arms to write in the air had improved his perception of gross and subtle differences, including direction, and had helped his memory in trying to learn handwriting as a learning disabled child.

Procedure:

1. Work area should include a large table surface and board space.
2. Each letter will be written in the air with both arms; directional cues will be given orally and visually demonstrated simultaneously.
3. The student will be allowed to practice each letter on the board and also on large drawing paper at the table.
4. Songs dealing with direction will be sung to reinforce this concept in addition to games dealing with concepts of up, down and around.
5. Additional remediation will be given where needed with the use of tactile letters for tracing and clay for molding.

Goal # 4 - Using multisensory instruction to teach handwriting to students with an attention deficit.

Rationale:

A condition that may be characteristic of some students with learning disabilities is an attention disorder; indicating the inability to sustain attention and so impeding mastery of academic skills (Shore, 1986).

The results of experiments done (Thorpe & Borden, 1985) provides support for the contention that multisensory instruction using a visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile approach succeeds because it increases student attention to task.

Procedure:

1. The student will be presented with a model hand on board and also on paper with colored utensils.
2. Each letter, and subsequently words, phrases and sentences; will be traced in the air several times.
3. As letter is traced, each stroke will be verbally described and student will repeat after teacher and eventually right along with teacher as each letter is mastered. After strokes are mastered, the student will just say the name of the letter aloud.
4. Materials will be available for supervised practice. These would be crayons, finger paints, drawing paper, clay, stencils or grooved letters and tactile letters made from foam and wood and felt.
5. This program would be based on the premise that every type of VAKT method would be available to be used as an alternative to each other whenever the attention of the student would waver.

Goal # 5 - Teaching cursive handwriting as a way of helping to correct a reversal problem.

Rationale:

An example of a specific behavior frequently associated with some learning disabled students is a reversal of letters, words, and numbers (strephosymbolia - meaning twisted symbol) (Adelman & Taylor, 1986).

It has been found that regardless of the etiology causing reversal; to help a student with a problem of direction, cursive handwriting is the best approach (Kaminsky & Powers, 1981). This is found to be true because words are more easily perceived as words, it emphasizes left to right progression and it is a more rhythmical procedure (Hanson, 1976).

Procedure:

1. The handwriting would be introduced through demonstration on the board.
2. Begin with the lower case alphabet, clustering letters requiring similar strokes; and start all of these on the base line.
3. The bulk of the work of the student would be done by tracing a model hand that would contain arrows for directions on each stroke and these strokes would be numbered in order of progression.
4. The student would move quickly to connecting letters so as to reinforce the left to right progression and also to experience the rhythmic flow of cursive writing which helps the student to avoid reversal more easily.
5. Close supervision and attention will be given to particular letters or words that would continue to be reversed. An individual guide showing correct and incorrect direction would be taped to the student's desk for easy reference.

6. Remediation would include games to reinforce direction and tactile materials to help student instill direction in motor memory.

Goal # 6 - Using relaxation to help learning disabled students improve handwriting and decrease physical tension.

Rationale:

Many learning disabled students show signs of physical tension during the task of handwriting (Lyman, 1986) and chronic physical tension can have severe consequences. (Carter & Synold, 1974) have observed that a large percentage of learning disabled students manifest significant handwriting problems connected with bodily tension and rigidity.

A strategy that has been effective with these students is a program using relaxation, which subsequently increased efficiency and decreased muscular tension and pressure during handwriting (Carter & Synold, 1974).

Procedure:

1. Prior to lesson, the student would stretch fingers to release the most obvious tension.
2. All handwriting lessons would begin with a breathing - relaxation period; 5 minutes. The instruction can be given by teacher or from a prepared tape.
3. The lesson would be instructed with a quiet and pleasant voice with background music playing during demonstration and practice to enhance a peaceful atmosphere. Actual handwriting lesson would be about ten minutes.
4. Encouragement and praise would be a very important part of this strategy to enhance a general feeling of relaxation and well-being.

Conclusion

Six activities have been presented that teachers can utilize to better enable learning disabled students to meet specific handwriting goals. A rationale has been provided for each goal in order that the teacher would be able to make an informed decision as to whether or not the suggested activity could benefit any of their learning disabled students. It is important, however, for teachers to keep in mind that the assessment of handwriting strengths and weaknesses of the learning disabled requires frequent and ongoing diagnosis. For more detailed discussion of the importance of systematic handwriting assessment and diagnosis and how to conduct such an assessment, the reader is directed to Hanson, 1976; Kaminsky & Powers, 1981; and Mercer & Mercer, 1985.

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